

Crown Him with Many Crowns
November 20, 2016
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Jeremiah 23:1-6
Colossians 1:11-20
Luke 23:33-43

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the seemingly never-ending season of Pentecost, and the Sunday before we switch from “Ordinary Time” green, with frequent use of Pentecostal red to commemorate martyrs to our nation’s gun culture, to a sedate Advent blue, with hopefully no reasons to switch to red.

The lessons for today present three very different visions of Christ the King. Three different crowns, if you will. But that’s not the way we humans work. We like to allow Christ to be King over some parts of our lives, but not others. My suggestion to you is that we cannot pick and choose which vision we will follow; we must follow all three.

In Paul's Letter to the Colossians, his picture of Christ’s kingship is a spiritual one. He is “the image of the invisible God,” Paul writes, “the firstborn of all creation.” He was before all things, and in him all things in heaven and earth were created.

I think everyone here can accept Jesus as God-king without hesitation. After all, that’s why we’re here today. We can gather together weekly as a congregation and worship the king on his heavenly throne, maybe even engage in Bible study and say Grace as a family before meals. We have great celebrations on Christmas and Easter, when we see people we haven’t seen since last Christmas or Easter. That is the stuff of genteel Christianity. But do we allow Christ’s kingship to impact our everyday lives?

In our reading from Jeremiah, the prophet is condemning political leaders of the southern kingdom of Judah. Advisors to King Zedekiah were urging him to rebel against the Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar, which the prophet considered to be fairly stupid. It turns out Jeremiah was correct, for the result of counsel was the conquest of Jerusalem and what was known as the Babylonian Captivity.

However, Jeremiah promises God will raise up new shepherds for the flock, new political leaders who will gather the dispersed people back together and issue in a period of new prosperity, who will make Judah great again.

Jeremiah also promises a new king. We tend to see the Old Testament through Jesus-colored glasses, but to the people for whom Jeremiah was written, this was an actual earthly ruler, a descendent of David who would execute righteousness in the land.

Have we crowned Jesus as our secular King, our liege lord, to use the medieval political concept? Do we live our everyday lives as if we were not in charge of them, but Jesus is? Do we view our possessions, our time, our talents, not as fruits of our own labor, but as if they were given to us, to be used as our King desires them to be used? Does Christ follow us into our work places, our recreation, our relationships with other people? On this past election day, did Christ follow us into the voting booth, or did we leave him outside?

Back in March, our presiding bishop, Michael Curry, said, “If we who are Christians participate in the political process and in the public discourse as we are called to do . . . the principle on which Christians must vote is the principle, Does this look like love of neighbor?”

On election day, 81% of white evangelical Christians voted for a candidate who, over the course of his campaign, denigrated Mexicans, Muslims, refugees, the handicapped, prisoners of war, women, LGBTQ citizens, please fill in any I may have left out. Lest we feel too smug, 60% of all white Protestants followed suit.

And there's more. In Missouri, voters approved a constitutional amendment that threatens to disenfranchise 220,000 Missourians, mostly the poor the elderly and minorities. Professed Christian politicians have resisted settling refugees in their states and communities, ignoring the fact that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were refugees. Does that look like love of neighbor?

And I get it. There are many reasons for voting the way we did. The American ayatollahs of the religious right have used several hot-button issues to convince their followings that the only hope for the moral life of America is to vote for Republicans, no matter how repulsive they are. And a lot of people just couldn't bring themselves to vote for either candidate and stayed home. I'm sure that the vast population who voted for the president-elect didn't vote for him because of all the intolerance he demonstrated in his campaign, but that intolerance did not provide enough justification to not vote for him. The sad thing is, using our presiding bishop's criteria, this election, Jews and the religiously unaffiliated were better Christians than white Christians were.

Luke's vision of the King of Kings is totally different. Jesus hangs upon a cross, between two other criminals. The only signs of his kingship are a crown of thorns and a sign hanging over his head saying, "This is the King of the Jews."

Those watching him die mock him for his apparent powerlessness. "If you are King of the Jews, save yourself." One of the other criminals agree with that sentiment, "Jesus, if you are the Son of God, get us out of this mess."

I confess that my initial reaction to our national electoral disaster was the same; to call on God to fix the mess our own failings had made, and to save us, and the world. At times I'm still there, despite having doubled my dosage of antidepressants.

The second thief in John's gospel rebuked the first, and confessed that the two of them deserved what they were getting, what they had brought about through their own failings. The United States has already started reaping the rewards of choosing a path paved with xenophobia, racism, misogyny, of intolerance of all who do not look, believe, or love like us. Hate crimes are rising, inclusive churches have been desecrated, and the president-elect of the United States is filling his cabinet with white supremacists and xenophobes.

Like the second thief, we deserve what we will get in the years to come, but it is the most vulnerable among us who will suffer most. The elderly will face cuts to or abolishment of Medicare and Social Security. The poor will face cuts or abolishment of the social services that make their lives livable, abolishment of Medicaid and the Affordable care act, and enforcement of minimum wage standards that will assure they continue to be poor. Women will face reduced healthcare options as old men in power seek to defund Planned Parenthood and other providers, continued substandard salaries for female workers, continued objectification by men engaging in "locker room talk" and sexual assault, because, after all, "our president did it." African-Americans, Hispanics, and other minorities will face continued disenfranchisement as state legislatures successfully gerrymander them out of the electorate, will face increased discrimination in employment and housing as federal guarantees are weakened or removed, and will face continued threats to their very lives, because too many in our society believe, "Black lives don't matter." American Muslims will be faced with continued harassment discrimination from those who blame entire populations for the actions of a few, and instead of protection from the federal government, could be forced to register, as Jews were forced to register in the Third Reich. LGBTQ

citizens will have to fight for hard earned gains and face further discrimination through so-called “Religious Freedom” laws. Our children and grandchildren will reap the results of the destruction of our environment in pursuit of material gain. The list of who will pay the price for our failure goes on and on.

We, as a nation need to emulate the second thief. We need to hang on the cross with our Lord and Savior. We need to confess our failings as the people of God, and renew the promises we make in our Baptismal Covenant to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Last week, Mother Megan told us:

“That commitment to follow Jesus right now has to include a commitment to stand with those of our community who are scared and grieving. Who are vulnerable right now. Whoever you voted for on Tuesday, the truth remains that this election has unleashed elements of racism, sexism, intolerance and bigotry that we have not seen in a long time. Right now, the marginalized in this country are more at risk than ever, and if we want to follow Jesus, we have to stand with them. We have to listen to them. We have to side with them. There is no alternative.”

My wife Linda accuses me of being a social media geek, and she’s right to a great extent. One campaign that has started since the election is a call for people of good-will to wear a safety pin to notify those threatened by the surge of intolerance in our society that you are an ally. Almost immediately, though, people were saying it was just a way to make white people feel better, without doing anything to correct the situation.

Wearing a safety pin is not meant to be just a symbol, but a pledge -- a pledge to step up and oppose intolerance and oppression wherever one encounters it, a pledge to fight for a just society, and to strive to bring about the Kingdom of God. The Most Reverend Desmond Tutu once said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

The wearing of a safety pin is a reminder to me that I cannot remain neutral, remain silent when confronted by oppression and injustice, that I must pick up my cross and follow Jesus, as my God, my King, and my savior. I must crown him with many crowns.

If you wish to join me, I have a safety pin for you. Wear it with pride.